

# The Predatory Duchess

The Predatory Duchess is an adventure of mystery and intrigue.

The Duchy of Herrost had been peaceful and wealthy for as long as anyone can remember. The small nation was ruled by a series of dukes and duchesses from an ancient and noble line, and watched over by a family of seneschals so ancient, they had taken the title as their surname.

Invading armies always met with somewhat mysterious defeat, and unlicensed thieves who prowled the countryside in pursuit of riches tended to meet with inconvenience from the Duchy's well-established Thieves' Guild. Generally, aside from the occasional scandal from a young Lord or Lady whose excesses were too excessive even for the royalty, life in Herrost was mostly unremarkable.

The status quo was disturbed eleven years ago, when the Thirteenth Duchess revealed a terrible secret on her deathbed, one that called the royal succession into question. The exact nature of this secret never made it to the general public, getting lost in the resulting political maneuvering and chaos. Rumors abound: some say she revealed that her husband was a bastard without royal blood. Others say she was deranged, claiming her own son and heir had been stolen by changelings and replaced with an identical imposter. There were even rumors that the mysterious Thieves' Kingdom was somehow involved.

After the ensuing decade of paranoia and bloody assassination, most of the royal family was dead and the Duke's son was living in exile. With his parentage in question, there was no clear line of succession to the throne. It wasn't long before the Seneschal family brought forward Eleana, a young lady they insisted was directly descended from the fourth Duke, producing a sheaf of remarkably unfaded and complete historical documents to support this claim.

The Duchy has achieved a kind of tense equilibrium, but is no longer as safe or as peaceful as it once was. Rumor and intrigue are everywhere, and undercurrents of unrest lurk beneath the nation's apparent calm. Nothing is truly settled, not yet.

What is the truth behind the mystery of the Duke's bloodline? Who is this previously unknown young duchess, and why does she bear a striking physical resemblance to the Seneschals? Maybe you can get to the bottom of this, or perhaps some of Herrost's legendary wealth is ripe for the taking.

## The Three Claimants, And One More

Many players will want to heroically locate the legitimate heir and restore her to the throne. However, there *are* other options. At the end of the adventure, any of these notables may rule the Duchy.

### Eleana - The Golden Duchess

Alignment – Lawful Evil

The vain and cruel young lady who currently sits on the throne. She does indeed have royal blood: the fifth son of the Fourth Duke married into the Seneschal family, generations ago. They've been carefully grooming this bloodline for that entire time, to ensure that they would have a valid heir if anything happened to the royal family, while simultaneously and systematically eliminating the royal lines that might conceivably have a better claim. As far as they know, she is the true heir. They've been quite thorough.

If players ally themselves with Eleana, she will hire them to tie up loose ends. First she will send them to kill the Exiled Duke. Then she will ask them to track down rumors of a surviving heir somewhere in the Meriwether area. If they succeed in eliminating both her potential rivals, she will reward them richly and send them on their way.

Players who support Eleana will bypass most of the encounters with the Sherriff and local guardsmen, instead focusing more on large-scale, epic encounters with difficult groups of NPCs. This branch is designed to be more monetarily rewarding, though it will offer less in the way of magical items and future adventuring opportunities. It is the only path without an allied companion NPC, and Rudir will be an adversary. If players attempt to blackmail her or otherwise displease her, she will set a party of assassins on them shortly after they leave the border of the Duchy.

Eleana is not the true heir, but she is the person with the second best claim. If the true heir were to die, she would have no legitimate challenger.

### **Oren - The Exiled Duke**

Alignment – Neutral

Yes, it's true: over a hundred years ago, a magical shapeshifter known only as "The Changeling" replaced the Sixth Duke. Since that time, the changeling's wanton and capricious descendants of have lived high off the royal coffers and played at ruling, while the Seneschals gradually took control of the day-to-day business of running the country. Though they primarily behaved like gadabout hedonists, the changelings did possess substantial sorcerous power, enabling them to contribute significantly to the country's defense during invasions. It was during one such incident that the Seneschals began to suspect the true nature of the ersatz royal family, but they maintained the secret to keep the kingdom stable.

If his mother hadn't discovered the whole thing and attempted to blow the scheme wide open, Oren would be living in luxury and pretending to rule. Most in the nation would simply shrug their shoulders if he were restored. He'd have to find new seneschals, of course... but he'd be happy to name anyone the player might choose.

Players who support Oren will be joined by one of his so-called bastard cousins, who will be presented as human at first; in reality, he is a powerful doppelganger. Players will need all the help they can get, as this is the path where they will have the fewest allies and the most combat. The Sherriff, the Meriwether townsfolk, and Rudir are all aligned against the player. Magical items are common rewards in this branch, though items with a downside are prevalent.

Oren is a fairly powerful shapeshifter and sorcerer, but he is lazy, apathetic, and easily distracted. He is related to the last few changeling dukes, but they have no actual connection to the true royal line.

### **Awoo – the Wild Girl**

Alignment – Neutral Good

During the Seneschals' slow and brutal campaign to eliminate all other potential heirs to the throne, one family survived longer than any other. The second son of the Fifth Duke managed an estate in the countryside, and his family had been settled there happily for several generations before the campaign of assassination really started in earnest. The seneschals' machinations cost the family their estate but not their lives, and they moved to a modest house in the village of Meriwether. The family adapted surprisingly well to town life, making the seneschals' work more difficult, but they remained a target.

Twenty years ago, the seneschals realized that a young couple in Meriwether village had the strongest claim of anyone who remained alive, and redoubled their efforts. After a run of bad luck that culminated with their house burning down, the couple began to suspect something was going on. They allowed the seneschals to believe the fire had claimed their lives. A local forester named Yoren had been good friends with the couple, and he helped them disappear, moving them into an isolated cabin deep in the forest. Twelve years ago, the couple was killed by an assassin for the Seneschals, who had somehow discovered their hiding place. The last of the Meriwether line was gone, or so everyone thought. Several years ago, rumors began to spring up of a wild girl in the woods. Dark-haired and feral, could she be the couple's daughter?

Players who support Awoo will have an even mix of enemies and allies. They will have to convince the people that this wild girl is the true heir, which will require a mix of diplomacy, careful planning, and good deeds. Rudir is a potential ally on this path, and can be recruited to accompany the party. Rewards on this branch are balanced between money, magical items, and future story opportunities.

Awoo speaks common and druidic, but is almost completely feral. She was five when her parents were killed and she escaped into the forest. She is the true heir.

### **Rudir – Princess of Thieves**

Alignment – Chaotic Good

Rudir isn't related to either of the Herrost ducal families, human or changeling. She is, however: a princess of the rather nebulously defined Kingdom of Thieves. Whether that is a literal place or something else is a matter left to another campaign, but she is aware that she has a history and a heritage. Her primary purpose is to restore relations between the local Thieves Guild and the royal family, and to place a ruler with a compatible worldview on the throne. Of the main claimants, Awoo is the only one she will support.

Players who go to Meriwether usually arrive there with limited information: they're looking for a dark-haired girl in her late teens or early twenties who bears a royal sigil and has no family, and Rudir fits that description. Rudir will not claim to be the lost heir, but if players jump to that erroneous conclusion on their own, she will not correct them. Instead, she will reply with the true (but misleading) statement that she doesn't really remember her early childhood, other than the fact that she grew up without parents.

Identifying Rudir as the heiress isn't meant to be a mistake that's easy to make. There is plenty of evidence that contradicts this assumption, especially in Meriwether – rumors of the wolf girl in the woods do not match Rudir's appearance or behavior, and if players ask Yogen the right questions after earning his trust, he tell them that he suspects the wolf girl in the woods is the lost heir. The symbol on Rudir's necklace doesn't actually bear any resemblance to the sigil of the Royal family of Herrost, either. Still, if players leave Meriwether without investigating, or if they fail to save it from the Sherriff's attack before they learn any of these things, it becomes much more difficult for them to disabuse themselves of the notion that Rudir is the heiress, and she will play along to the point of allowing the players to place her on the throne.

It's not often that you get a chance to steal a whole country, after all.